

# Developing a Systematic Programme Focused Assessment and Feedback Strategy

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## Class Size

There are approximately 420 students on the DCU Open Education Humanities Programme

## Feedback Approaches

Peer feedback; Marking guides, rubrics, and exemplars; Feedforward strategies – linked assignments – multi-stage assignments; Programmatic approaches

## Discipline

Humanities/Social Science

## Technologies

Moodle Assignment & Moodle Feedback Files.

## Challenge & Aim

This case study details the development of a systematic, programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy by the Humanities Programme Team, in Dublin City University's Open Education Unit. Such a strategy is represented by a design that explicitly provides students with appropriate opportunities to attain all programme learning outcomes, as well as module learning outcomes, as they advance through their studies. An essential aspect of this endeavour was to ensure the appropriate usage and variety

of assessment types, and integral to this is the need to ensure that appropriate feedback is being provided to students for each of these assessment types. As such appropriate feedback mechanisms are vital in order to achieve a successful assessment that makes a real impact on learners. This is especially important in students first year of study when positive experiences with assessment feedback can contribute to retaining students.

The challenge addressed was how to ensure students receive high quality feedback regardless of the type of assessment completed, in the context of a programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy in an online, undergraduate programme. This involved establishing the appropriate range and scaffolding of assessment and feedback types across the programme, and working with the academic staff who develop the assessments, the online tutors who teach the students, and the students themselves to establish an effective and dialogic assessment and feedback culture.

Another salient challenge facing this initiative was to ensure that feedback from different tutors was consistent across the programme, in order to create a consistent student experience, and also within a module where there were two or more online tutors giving feedback to their tutorial groups.

The aim of this case study was to build a systematic programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy, involving the development of an Assessment and Feedback Matrix that allows assessments and feedback to be explicitly aligned with module and programme learning outcomes.

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## Evidence from the Literature

The Open Education Unit harnesses the approach that ‘assessment drives learning’ (Hassan, 2011) and coupled with the crucial role of feedback (Simpson, 2014), this stance has the potential to be a major pedagogical instrument in shaping the student experience. The function of assessment should not merely be to measure learning, it should be an occasion for student engagement and development of learning (Boud et al., 2010). Successfully engaging with assessments, which students achieve by completing assignments and then learning from the feedback they receive on that work, is an opportunity for students to achieve and demonstrate key knowledge, skills and competencies.

Rossiter (2013) emphasises the importance of an assessment design that: ensures each assignment has a broad-based coverage of accreditation and/or university learning outcomes, and thus is efficient for both students and staff; challenges students to excel by setting high expectations, with penalties for study practices which are unprofessional; and facilitates student transition by requiring immediate and regular engagement, with corresponding feedback and support. This feedback is especially beneficial to students who may have been out of academia for a number of years, those who are new to higher education and ODL students without access to the cues and tacit information of the lecture-hall.

Appropriate and well-constructed evaluation criteria are vital to inform students' study and form the basis of the feedback which is provided by the lecturer. Providing students with the evaluation criteria before completion of the assignment can complement the relevance of feedback. This is important as students increasingly seek 'better feedback, more frequently, and more quickly' (Whitelock, 2008), and the feedback students

receive has a powerful impact on their learning (Evans, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback practices are vastly diverse in Irish higher education (O'Regan et al., 2015), perhaps similarly to Nicol's (2009) findings in Scottish higher education institutions, this is in relation to little or no guidance or support being given to those marking and writing student assessment in that practice.

## Feedback Approach

The first phase of the process involved conducting audits of programme learning outcomes for each qualification in order to determine what assessment and feedback types could be utilised in order to provide opportunities for students to achieve a particular learning outcome. Each audit was compared and a set of such assessment types compiled, which also detailed approaches to providing feedback and feedforward. Each assessment type has a specific feedback file associated with it in order to ensure that students receive appropriate feedback against a number of criteria. For example, the feedback file for an essay style assignment has a 'summary of performance' feedback grid indicating performance against a number of criteria such as attention to assignment task, analysis, structure, etc., a summary comments field, an advice for future assignments field, along with annotated feedback for the essay. In the creation of the first Assessment and Feedback Matrix the assessment and feedback types were then compared to those currently in use, with some deficiencies being highlighted. For example, assessments involving reflections, peer review, presentations, and group work were identified as being needed in order to align

with particular programme learning outcomes. In order to utilise these assessment types different feedback approaches were needed, for example an increased use of feedback rubrics.

The second phase of the process involved Assessment Writers receiving instructions developed by the Programme Team in relation to the number and types of assessments, with associated feedback types, in a module. These instructions clearly established parameters within which Assessment Writers were free to develop assessments with appropriate mechanisms for feedback. Furthermore the Assessment Writers received feedback from tutors and staff in quality assurance roles, alongside student evaluations in order to assist them in preparing assessment and feedback documentation for the following academic year. These documents were reviewed by the team and it was ensured that the feedback files would provide appropriate feedback, that assessment due dates were appropriately spaced, in order to manage student workload, support a feedforward approach to assessment, and allow sufficient time for tutors to produce high quality feedback for students. Our feedforward policy

is that feedback be returned to students within three weeks of its submission due date.

The third phase of the process involved providing information and training relating to the Assessment and Feedback Matrix, and the related new assessment and feedback types, to the assessment writers, online tutors and students. In order to facilitate Assessment Writers in the transition to a programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy, and provide them with flexible professional development opportunities, an online course entitled 'Creating Assessments for Online Distance Education Students' was created within DCU's Virtual Learning Environment, Loop. This course introduces basic assessment and feedback principles before going on to explore different assessment and feedback types with information and resources provided to writers. These resources include sample feedback files, feedback grids, and rubrics etc. which are crucial in guiding appropriate feedback. Tutors were provided with information relating to the new assessment and feedback types in order to facilitate their work dialogically with the students as they prepare students for assessments in synchronous tutorials and asynchronous discussion forums and provide detailed feedback to students based on their submitted work. Information was provided to students in order to empathise the importance

of varied assessment types to their learning, especially around the importance of collaboration and peer learning.

The fourth phase of the process focused on establishing a link between the programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy and the programme's quality assurance processes. Approximately 20% of all tutor-marked assignments on this programme are submitted to an academic staff member who acts as the Assessment Monitor, for review. The role of the monitor is to ensure that the marks awarded by the tutors are appropriate and in line with the marking guidelines. They also report on the quality of feedback given by the tutors to the students. The Programme Team then reviews the Assessment Monitors' reports and forward them to the tutors in order to ensure consistently high quality marking and feedback over time. Where necessary, the Programme Team will note any issues which have been highlighted by the monitors for action. The assignment monitoring system has been, and continues to be, a positive asset in the Programme's quality assurance mechanisms. As new assessment and feedback approaches were introduced the Programme Team worked with the Assessment Monitors to ensure that they were familiar with the different assessment types and feedback files.

## Outcomes

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A workshop was run in order to facilitate discussion with and between Assessment Writers, and provided a platform for voicing concerns, and proposing ideas on how different approaches to feedback could be developed.

This allowed for assessment writing groups to form within subject areas, making discussions around potential methods of feedback more cohesive at subsequent subject team meetings. The subject review meetings are annual meetings

that bring together multiple points of feedback from academic staff and students, and in this way the ongoing development of assessment and feedback approaches is shaped by this iterative process.

Positive feedback was received from all stakeholders for the majority of the new assessment/feedback approaches. The majority of the online tutors had positive experiences incorporating the preparation of students, for these new assessment/feedback types, into their teaching. Other tutors gave less favourable feedback, claiming the new approaches were more difficult to manage, mark, and provide feedback on. In addition they believed the new approaches were depriving them of academic freedom.

Additional information relating to the rationale for the use of the Assessment and Feedback Matrix and the associated assessment/feedback types were communicated to the online tutors in emails and then discussed in the annual subject review meetings. These meetings have been used to bridge the gap, where one existed, between subject-specific assessment preferences and the variety of assessment and feedback types being implemented. This is an ongoing iterative process that must produce a variety of assessment and feedback types that also satisfy subject teams' preferences for assessments and feedback processes in their subject area.

### **Student Response**

As part of the online module evaluation process, students on this online, undergraduate Humanities programme were asked to answer questions via Loop related to the assessment and feedback aspects of their respective modules. The majority of this feedback was positive, with students feeling that they receive timely, high quality feedback on their assessment work. Some students also gave negative feedback related to participatory assessments, feeling this type of assignment impinges on the flexibility they

expected from online study. The only negative feedback from students specifically relating to the feedback they received was where students felt they were not getting enough feedback, or that feedback they received was too vague or harsh. In order to reinforce the importance of the assessment and feedback strategy, the rationale for the new approach to assessment and feedback was communicated to students in several formats (e.g., course handbook, module descriptors, and a communication sent in July each year detailing changes being made to their Programme in the next academic year). Below are several positive quotes relating to assessment feedback, from student surveys in 2015:

*"I found that [Name of tutor] provided good quality feedback on assignments, both in writing and in online discussions. The feedback was constructive and helped me to improve the quality of my work. The turnaround of marking/feedback was also prompt."*

*"Tutor feedback and comments were extensive and very helpful. I learnt from the tutor comments as my final assignment grade was higher than assignment 2. Assignments were marked in a very timely fashion."*

*"The module units were appropriate and easy to read and the assignments were very open which meant we were free to explore many areas. All the feedback I received was timely, fair and improved not just my essays but my understanding of the module."*

*"Feedback on assignments was extensive and incredibly useful, it was obvious how much time the tutor spent on marking them by the feedback and so the marking couldn't be anything but fair."*

*"[Name of tutor]'s feedback was fantastic. She was able to see that I had put a lot of effort into them, and although I achieved high results in all assignments, she had no issues in pointing out where I lost the occasional mark. As a student who is constantly aiming for top marks, this feedback was needed and appreciated."*

## Recommendations

This case study exemplifies the possibility to build a programme focused assessment and feedback strategy. Presented below are the key recommendations for other programme teams aiming to ensure students receive high quality feedback as part of a coherent programme-focused assessment and feedback strategy:

- Explicitly align assessment and feedback processes with both programme and module learning outcomes
- Provide supportive resources for Assessment Writers - important to provide templates and examples of marking guidelines, rubrics, and other types of feedback
- Provide support for Assessment Writers through communication and professional development
- Establish a formal link between assessment and feedback strategy and quality assurance processes
- All elements of a programme team's assessment and feedback strategy must remain under constant review and be adaptable to change as new technologies emerge

## Useful Links/Further Information

Pass position paper: <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/position-paper.pdf>

Map my programme: <https://sites.google.com/site/mapmyprogramme/home>

TESTA Project: <https://www.testa.ac.uk/>

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### Contact



If interested in finding out more about this approach or technology, please contact Dr James Brunton at [james.brunton@dcu.ie](mailto:james.brunton@dcu.ie).

### Cite as;

Brunton, J, Brown, M., Costello, E. & Farrell, O. 2017. Developing a Systematic Programme Focused Assessment and Feedback Strategy. IN: Technology-Enabled Feedback Approaches for First-Year: Y1 Feedback Case Studies in Practice: Y1Feedback. Available from: <https://www.y1feedback.ie>